



Breeders' Briefcase

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Six Pack Abs

By Lisa Dubé Forman

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In my opinion, as a Judge, there is nearly nothing more satisfying than examining a dog whose muscling is hard as a rock. Truly, nowadays this is a rarity because many entries in the show ring are poorly conditioned. Their muscling is soft, squishy and this is not localized to a few breeds, but runs the gamut.

I have sat and watched judges adjudicate over a respectable number and quality of entries and afterwards, I have chatted with them about their decisions. Though on just one or more of these occasions have judges remarked that the dog's fitness was an important factor in their deliberations and awards. In recent memory, I can count on one hand how many times a judge has reflected back on their conclusions and stated that fitness was of primary importance. One instance comes to mind after I attended a Hound Show and observed the judging of a large entry of ridgebacks. I was unable to catch up with this judge after their busy day's assignments, however approximately a month or so later I did have the opportunity to chat with them while we both happened to attend the same event. While discussing their previous ridgeback assignment I asked them

why they awarded their Winners and without hesitating, the judge stated the dog's fitness was of primary importance and was a deciding factor. I had already suspected this was the case because I am a keen observer of judges' hands. As I've written, communication is a lost art form in our sport because our late 'great' sportsmen and women communicated everything they were thinking simply with their hands while examining dogs. This judge, indeed before awarding Winners, went back and felt all hindquarters in the winner's class lineup. In truth, the judge stated it was one of the few hounds that day who had toned, firm muscling!

Although I have been judging for less than a decade, I still can count only a few times where I had the great pleasure of finding a well-muscled, fit dog to examine. When I do, I congratulate the exhibitor with glee. When I am not judging and either observing or exhibiting, I will ask if I can 'go over a dog' that interests me and nine times out of ten, the dog will have poor muscle tone. Let's define muscle tone as this is instrumental to our conversation. Muscle tone (residual muscle tension) is best described

by any of the online dictionaries as the normal level of firmness or slight contraction in a resting muscle. This continuous and passive partial contraction of the muscles or its resistance is felt when the dog is standing for examination. Of course, not all muscles are tangible, therefore I speak only to these that are palpable during examination. Excellent toned muscle and abundance thereof are inextricable with fitness. Yes, hearts, lungs are also other important factors in exercise performance, but here I speak only to muscle.

It is extremely disappointing as well as sad that otherwise 'typey' examples of various breeds are not in good physical condition. Perhaps many fanciers and exhibitors are not aware that if a dog is unfit, the condition can affect the dog's movement. In some breeds such as the hunting sighthounds, e.g., Irish Wolfhound, if a pup has not developed muscling by a certain age in puppyhood, then most likely the hound will have poor quality of muscling throughout its adult life. This quality of state is predicated first on the genetic properties, the expression of genes directing the cellular development of the muscling, and constructive metabolism, overall influencing quality skeletal muscling. If this exists, then we look to the quality and length of play, romping, turning and twisting in large, secure areas that influences and tones these bands of tissue. Thus, if a dog who is genetically favored with superior skeletal muscling has not received the supervised, safe exercise its breed demands, his capacity, his ability to excel during exercise, skills or performance suffers. Not only that, muscling is responsible for contracting and producing movement in the body as well as maintaining the position of

the body parts. If the dog has inferior quality and toning of muscle, it will affect the dog's energy level, his efforts, and his motion, all of which are self-evident.

Muscling in today's show dogs seem to be overlooked and undervalued as aesthetics is front and center. Many muscle groups are commonly neglected in breeds that require specified areas to have exceptional muscling. As an illustration, my sighthound breed's neck muscling is critical in the kill and take down, and I have owned many hounds with 'hard as a rock' neck muscles. Once you feel such power, you will not forget it. Even so, to the best of my recollection over my nearly 30 years, only a handful of judges have recognized and commented on this significant aspect.

There still remain conscientious, knowledgeable breeders who will grade their dogs on skeletal muscling. Indeed, I knew a breeder who had a lovely hound epitomizing breed type, but the breeder would not use this bitch in their breeding program because the hound possessed genetically poor quality muscling. Rather than perpetuate the serious weakness and limitations, the breeder abstained from using the dog in their otherwise noteworthy breeding program. To be sure, these were actions of a role model.